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AUTHOR Lule, Jack
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ABSTRACT

Defining inquiry as a discussion, a conversation that tries to make sense of what is happening, this paper argues in favor of replacing the traditional metaphor for news--news as science--with an alternative metaphor--news as drama--in order to provide a useful vocabulary for making sense of news. Traditional metaphors that have organized research on news are reviewed and criticized for allowing news to be experienced in a limited way that encourages talk of bias, truth, fact, source, and objectivity and discourages other kinds of talk, such as theme, scene, language, meaning, genre, and convention. A research review of scholarly work in various disciplines is presented and criticized as being somewhat fragmented and marginal in attempting to illuminate discussions of news with such metaphors as news as social science, news as ritual, news as organizational product, and news as myth. However, the paper suggests that many of the insights culled from these alternative metaphors for news might be reorganized, brought together and extended through the metaphor of news as drama. (Fifty-four references are provided.) (NH)

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NEWS AS DRAMA:
THE STUDY OF NEWS LANGUAGE

Jack Lule
Faculty of Communication
The University of Tulsa
Tulsa, Oklahoma, 74104
(918) 631-2542

Qualitative Studies Division
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
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ABSTRACT

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THE STUDY OF NEWS LANGUAGE

This paper argues that news is first and foremost language, and that study of news and social life should be grounded in metaphor that engages the language of news. The approach first surveys some traditional and non-traditional metaphors that have organized research on news, and then brings together the work of writers in various disciplines to advance and defend an alternative metaphor: news as drama. The paper contends: To study news as drama is to study the language of news, the worlds offered in that language, and the extent to which the language of news encourages particular events to be reported and in a particular way.

by Jack Lule, PhD
Faculty of Communication
The University of Tulsa
Tulsa, Oklahoma 74104
(918)631-2542

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NEWS AS DRAMA:

THE STUDY OF NEWS LANGUAGE

In the requiem of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," family and friends are gathered round the grave of Willy. They try to make sense of his death. Biff, the elder son, suffers hugely. "He had the wrong dreams," Biff murmurs. "All, all wrong." The younger son Happy becomes enraged and vows to fight for his father's dreams. "All right, boy," Happy says to his brother. "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain" (Miller, 1958, pp. 138-39).

In The New York Times report "Hijacking Victim Buried at Arlington Cemetery," 1 family and friends are gathered round the grave of Robert Dean Stethem, a U.S. Navy diver killed by terrorists aboard TWA Flight 847. An early paragraph is a quotation taken from the eulogy. "'Robert Stethem has not died in vain,' the Rev. Wendell Cover said in the memorial service. 'He gave us an example of courage, bravery and love.'" The closing paragraphs are given over to the impassioned words of Robert's brother Patrick: "He gave his life not for one individual or two, but for every single person in the free world today" (Hijacking Victim, June 21, 1985, p. A1Ø).

Each of these graveside scenes struggles to give meaning to life in the face of death. Each portrays a complex world, torn by contending forces; each takes an attitude to that world and

offers a perspective to be shared by others. To this end, in each work, the scenes, characters and acts were selected from many possible choices; they were arranged, shaped and presented so as to provide impact, eloquence and insight. The first work is called drama, the second is called news and study of the relationship between the two may lead to a useful, liberating metaphor for thinking about and talking about news.

Metaphor here is used in a dynamic way. As Aristotle said, metaphor is the experience of one thing as another. Likewise, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue in Metaphors We Live By that metaphors can channel and control the way people experience things. Metaphor can organize experience; metaphor can control talk.

In this century, traditional metaphors for news have "clustered" around (Burke, 1976, p. 7) facts, information, investigation, the pursuit of truth -- news as science. Based upon admiration of, perhaps infatuation with, scientific method, transformed into journalistic canon and convention, evidenced by concerns such as objectivity and bias, notions of news as science have dominated talk about news. In the experience suggested by the metaphor, the journalist, through thorough and objective research, dispassionately pursues and gathers the facts about particular events and phenomena in social life and presents the results in the style and structure of the news report. "Journalism's job," says William Small (1970, p. 282), former

director of CBS News in Washington, "is to try to determine what is real and what is not."

The ruling metaphor of news as science has allowed news to be experienced in a particular, limited way. It encourages talk of bias, truth, fact, source, objectivity; it discourages other kinds of talk, such as theme, scene, language, meaning, genre, convention. Oddly, it is not that news as science says too much; it says too little. Conversation about news wearily considers day after day the same tired questions: How well did news pursue and provide the facts? How objective was the report? Was there evidence of bias? News as science discourages contemplation of the meaning of the method, style, structure, convention and language that flows through the unreflexive heart of news.

Many critiques of news as science have been put forth from all points of critical perspective. Yet consensus on critique has not led to consensus on an alternative metaphor for news. As this essay will show, news has been likened to poetry, ideology, celebration, ritual, organizational product, entertainment, discourse, knowledge, myth.

Yet these metaphors have captured no real ground in the academy and certainly none in the professional world. Some obtain insights in the marketplace, others in the newsroom. Some focus on political structure, others on the social, historical and technological processes that help produce news or that news helps produce. In such perspectives, insightful though they are, it is often easy to lose sight of the primordial site: the news

-- the words and pictures, the language -- of this particular symbolic form.

In this essay, then, I want to argue that news is first and foremost language, and that study of news and social life should be grounded in metaphor that engages the language of news. My approach is first to survey some traditional and non-traditional metaphors that have organized research on news. I then bring together the work of writers in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science, and communication who have considered an alternative metaphor: news as drama. My primary concern here will be to advance and defend the worthiness of drama as a working concept for the university as well as for the newsroom. Finally I contend that the metaphor of news as drama gives rise to study of news language and its relationship to social life. That is: To study news as drama is to study the language of news, the worlds offered in that language, and the extent to which the language of news encourages particular events to be reported and in a particular way.

The search for an alternative metaphor for news thus is much more than a rhetorical quest. Discussions of news need to be revitalized. Inquiry needs a new metaphor to organize talk about news. The attempt to arrive at a new metaphor is hermeneutic in intent then, but in Richard Rorty's puckish perspective. "On my view," he says (1982, p. 199), "being 'interpretive' or 'hermeneutical' is not having a special method but simply casting about for a vocabulary which might help." Or as he writes

elsewhere, those who engage in interpretive research "cast around for some way of making sense of what is happening by looking for a vocabulary in which the puzzling object is related to other objects so as to become intelligible" (1983, p. 166).

I will argue that drama can provide a useful vocabulary for making sense of news. As Hugh Dalziel Duncan noted so keenly, "people do not want information about, but identification with, community life. In drama, they participate" (1968, p. 34). The shift in subject from information to identification, from news as science to news as drama, can open new avenues of conversation -- of inquiry -- about news.

WAYS TO TALK ABOUT NEWS

> WASHINGTON, June 2Ø -- Robert Dean Stethem, the Navy diver who was killed by Shiite terrrorists in Beirut, Lebanon, last week, was buried today with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.
>
> Amid hundreds of mourners dressed in black or Navy whites, six Navy honor guardsmen walked in step, carrying the flag-draped, gray steel coffin that bore the body of Mr. Stethem, a 23-year-old from Waldorf, Md.
>
> Throughout the service Mr. Stethem's parents, Patricia and Richard Stethem, sat near the grave with their 3 other children, holding hands.

The above paragraphs, published in The New York Times (Hijacking Victim, June 21, 1985, p. A1Ø) provide an effective, well-written opening for a stirring event. Surely the lead

fulfills traditional ways to talk about news. It meets the basic Webster definition of news as "new information about anything, or information previously unknown" (Guralnik, 1972, p. 958). More specifically, it provides excellent details of the "five Ws and H," telling who and what were involved, when and where action took place, and even hints at probing how and why the event occurred. In the metaphor of news as science: the lead, summarizing the results of observation and investigation, provides facts and information in the form of a report about the burial of the terrorist victim.

Why has this metaphor dominated talk about news? A primary reason is that the metaphor supports a whole set of readily-accepted assumptions about information, the public and democratic life. The role of the report assumed in the metaphor of news as science is to provide the public with information necessary for responsible citizenship. This is the received tradition of news, basic to centuries of writing about news. John Madison (Mott and Casey, 1937, p. 56), author of the First Amendment, wrote that the news is necessary for "canvassing the merits and measures of public men of every description." A similar view was stated eloquently by editor Samuel Bowles (Mott and Casey, 1937, p. 116) in an 1851 editorial in the Springfield Republican. The "brilliant mission" of the news, Bowles wrote, is to be "the world's great informer, the earth's high censor, the medium of public thought and opinion." Fred Siebert (1956, p. 51) said news should "assist in the process of solving political and

social problems by presenting all manner of evidence and opinion as the basis for decisions."

And the Times lead on Robert Dean Stethem does meet these evocative criteria of news. But the lead also does much more. In just three paragraphs, curious, suggestive aspects of language can be observed. There is an emphasis on the national status of the victim. In the first line Stethem is described as "the Navy diver who was killed." The article "the" (as opposed to "a") assumes that readers know about the diver and are aware of who he is. The sentence also notes he was buried with "full military honors" at Arlington National Cemetery, burial ground of the nation's heroes. The second paragraph captures some of the color and circumstance of the military burial, noting the hundreds of mourners and guardsmen walking in step; it contrasts the black of mourners with "the Navy whites," and the gray steel coffin with the flag draped over it. The third paragraph zeroes in, as with a zoom lens, on a precise and telling detail. Stethem's parents sit near the grave, "holding hands." The sentence is constructed so that the singular image lingers on.

In just three paragraphs, the report begins to develop two powerful perspectives on Stethem: his national, political status as a victim of international terrorism and, concurrently, his place in a family that grieves his loss. The report is an attempt to make sense of the loss of an American and the loss of a son.

It seems natural for the news report to do this. None of the information seems conspicuous or extraneous. But surely more is going on here than mere information. The lead provides the bare information: A terrorist victim is buried. So what is the story about? More broadly, the question then becomes: How can we best talk about what the news story is about?

Alternative Metaphors for News

In their attempts to illuminate discussions of news, many writers have employed alternatives for the traditional metaphor of news as science. Early in this century, under sway of the perceived power of media technology and the promise of social science, writers worked toward a new metaphor, something akin to news as social science.

One of the first to proffer such a view was the journalist-philosopher Walter Lippmann (1922). Unerringly pinpointing the failure of news to capture truth, but also cynically pessimistic about the interest or ability of citizens to know the truth, Lippmann proposed that news be put in the hands of social scientists who would report not to the public but to public officials. The problem for Lippmann -- news was not scientific enough. The answer resided "in social organization based on a system of analysis and record, and in all the corollaries of that principle" (1922, p. 364).

Others echoed his call. Although adamantly opposed to Lippmann's rejection of the "omnicompetent citizen" and the anti-democratic establishment of "social organizations" for relaying

information to decision makers, John Dewey too ascribed to the metaphor of news as social science. "There remains the possibility of treating news events in the light of a continuing study and record of underlying conditions," he wrote (1922, p. 288). "The union of social science, access to facts, and the art of literary presentation is not an easy thing to achieve. But its attainment seems to me the only genuine solution of the problem of an intelligent direction of social life." 2

Some writers have found in Dewey the basis for other metaphors for news. Dewey's insights into communication and his emphasis on the common and communal heart of communication led some scholars to make sense of news from this perspective. The sociologist and former reporter Robert Park (1940) offered a metaphor of news as a form of knowledge. Using William James' distinction between acquaintance with and knowledge about, Park placed news on a continuum of knowledge. "News is not systematic knowledge like that of the physcial sciences," Park said (1940, p. 675). Rather, news is "something that will make people talk" and tends to have the character of a "public document." Its primary importance is consensual. "The function of news," Park concluded (p. 685) "is to orient man and society in an actual world."

Another metaphor derived from the work of Dewey is news as ritual. In advocating a cultural approach to communication, James Carey, like Park, has relied upon Dewey's insights into the shared, communal aspects of communication. In "A Cultural

Approach to Communication," Carey (1975, p. 8) offers news as ritual, which views "reading a newspaper less as sending or gaining information and more like attending a mass: a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed." He argues (p. 9), "A ritual view of communication does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change. It merely contends that one cannot understand these processes aright except as they are cast within an essentially ritualistic view of communication and social order."

In the same article, Carey also compares news with drama. At times, however, Carey's use of ritual and drama can be distracting. Often he appears to interchange ritual and drama. From the perspective of this essay, though, it makes more sense to see ritual as an aspect of groups. Ritual places its emphasis on the act of an audience, on the active participation of people with the news. Drama, however, is an aspect of texts. It focuses discussion on the act of the text, the invitation of news language, the world offered to to readers and viewers. Carey's excellent insights on news as drama thus will be isolated and examined in the following section.

Carey has become increasingly aware of the power of metaphor to control talk about news. In his recent writings, he continues to propose other intriguing metaphors to enliven talk about news. He has suggested "we ought to think of journalism not as an outgrowth of science and the Enlightenment, but more as an

extension of poetry, the humanities, and political utopianism. What would journalism look like if we grounded it in poetry, if we tried to literalize that metaphor rather than the metaphor of objectivity and science?" (1987, p. 14).

The ritual view of news has spawned other metaphors for news. For example, James Capo (1985, p. 16) focuses on one aspect of ritual and suggests that news be seen as cultural celebration, pointing out that news media "provide audiences with opportunities to celebrate themselves, their culture, and human heritage." He says (p. 27), "From the perspective of news as cultural celebration, the principle of beauty would call for a presentation and structuring of the facts to bring out the best in a culture's experience of appearances."

Another dominant metaphor governing recent research has been news as organizational product. In this metaphor, news is analyzed as the outcome of professional and organizational routines and training. Filling in large gaps in research on the newsroom, scholars have used field observations and interviews to study "newsmaking." Epstein (1973), Roshco (1975), Tuchman (1978), Gans (1979) and others have considered the premise that "social structure is the major influence on the content of the press" (Roshco, 1975, p. 5), and their work has added an important dimension to discussions of news.

Another prominent metaphor in research has been news as myth. The metaphor can be traced at least back to the 1957 publication of Roland Barthes' Mythologies, a collection of

semiotic analyses of modern myths in professional wrestling, advertisements, novels -- and news. "The starting point of these reflections," wrote Barthes (1972, p. 11), "was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the naturalness with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history." For Barthes, news was like myth because of its ability to communicate with such naturalness the values and ideals of a dominant political order.

In more recent works, others have extended the notion of news as myth and derived a critical perspective that considers news as ideology, probably the most significant alternative metaphor offered for news in modern communication research. From this perspective, which also has roots in the Frankfurt School's critique of the production of culture, news, like other cultural phenomena, is seen as reproducing the dominant political-economic structure. This metaphor informs the work of Gitlin (1980), Tuchman (1981), Hall (1982) and other writers in critical studies.

For example, in an essay, "Myth and the Consciousness Industry," Tuchman (1981, p. 90) wrote, "News, then, presents a politically legitimated reality. And the news-frame thrusts that mode of interpreting the world on news consumers." She concluded, "As myth, news suggests that social and economic forces (never analyzed but detailed through the logic of the concrete) are primeval forces akin to the bureaucratized

legitimated institutions designed to cope with them." Similarly, Stuart Hall has written (1982, p. 72), "Just as the myth-teller may be unaware of the basic elements out of which his particular version of the myth is generated, so broadcasters may not be aware of the fact that the frameworks and classifications they were drawing on reproduced the ideological inventories of their society."

Each of these alternative metaphors has added to discussions of news and its role in social life. Each has succeeded in moving conversation, if only for awhile, away from the tired debate over truth, objectivity and the bias of news. Each has provided its own set of questions and concerns with which to organize inquiry into the news. Yet the discussions have remained somewhat fragmented and marginal. Each line of inquiry remains relatively distinct from others and there is little consensus of concern. Each alternative uses a distinct vocabulary. Students of newsmaking employ a vocabulary different from students of critical theory who speak a language unintelligible in the newsroom.

Why should this be so? The answer may be that each of the alternative perspectives makes vastly different assumptions about the proper site of study for news. The metaphor of news as organizational product makes its subject the newsgathering process; news as ideology investigates political-economic structure; news as ritual emphasizes communal participation and shared beliefs.

One metaphor, however, might provide a common vocabulary for the differing perspectives as well as offer a shared and central site for study: news as drama. Broad enough to capture the distinct emphases but positively grounded in the words and worlds of the news, the metaphor can organize discussions around the one subject missing from most inquiries of news -- language.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect revealed in a review of alternative perspectives for news is the lack of sustained, critical study of news language. "Despite the massive amount of research into mass communication in both Britain and America, until fairly recently neither media sociologists nor sociolinguists have been much concerned with the language of the mass media," notes Sandra J. Harris (1988, p. 72) in a review article. Many researchers do not so much discuss news; they use news to speak about something else, they look to news to find evidence of failed democratic practice, of hegemony, of celebration, of the influence of organizational routine, of the promise of community life. The little work that has been done with media language, such as that by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980, 1982, 1985) and van Dijk (1988a, 1988b), appears to be based on the traditional metaphor of news as science; that is, the study of language is used to critique the success of news reports in representing reality.

Many of the insights culled from alternative metaphors for news might be retained, brought together and extended through the metaphor of news as drama. In the next sections, I argue that

the metaphor of news as drama, taken from the words and worlds of news, can encourage and enliven talk about an overlooked topic -- news language.

NEWS AS DRAMA

> Mr. Stethem had been on his way to Rome from Athens aboard Trans World Airlines flight 847 when it was hijacked by Shiite terrorists last week. He was beaten and shot to death June 14 by the hijackers, who dumped his body from the aircraft onto the tarmac of the Beirut airfield. Forty Americans are still being held hostage.
>
> As clouds gathered overhead, seven Navy riflemen fired three volleys. A bugler played taps, and the honor guardsmen folded the American flag that had draped the coffin for three days. A Navy commander presented Mr. and Mrs. Stethem with the flag and a Purple Heart, the medal given to wounded servicemen (Hijacking Victim, June 10, 1985, p. A10).

Burke (1973, p. 1) says that critical and imaginative works are strategic answers to situations. In his by-now familiar words, "These strategies size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them." He sees such works as symbolic acts, approaches them in terms of drama and affirms that the method of analysis is "the dramatistic study of language" (1976, p. 7).

No doubt the Times report on Robbie Stethem is a strategy for a compelling situation. In the two paragraphs above, which follow the opening account of the burial, the report describes the situation. The description of Stethem's death and the added detail that his murderers "dumped his body from the aicraft onto the tarmac" offer a portrayal of agency -- how the hijackers acted; the report depicts the brutality of the hijackers and their sheer disregard for the dignity of human life.

The next paragraph takes an emphatic attitude toward the situation, contrasting the agency of Stethem's murderers with the agency of his mourners; his burial is a scene of dignity. Leading off with the almost melodramatic observation, "As clouds gathered overhead," as if God himself were displeased with the situation, the report offers a portrait of honor and reverence, including a gun salute, taps, and the presentation of the flag and the Purple Heart.

Burke argued that symbolic forms, such as the news report on the burial, are best conceived in terms of drama. As will be shown, the metaphor of news as drama incorporates Burke's argument into inquiry about news. News as drama does not argue against traditional conceptions of news as watchdog of the state, informer and entertainer of the public and medium of public thought. Drama too observes, informs, entertains and mediates. But drama does more. And if news is like drama, it too may be accomplishing much more. News, seen as drama, may be participating in the process in which language gives order and

meaning to experience, in which meaning itself then is created and confirmed.

Talking About News as Drama

The metaphor of news as drama has a number of advantages. Conceptions of news as drama can inquire into the personal relationship news seems to establish with readers but bases such discussion in the worlds offered by news rather than some gratification of some news audience. Although he criticized it, Lippmann (1922, p. 355) pointed out the similarity between news and drama in this regard. Lippmann said that news provokes feeling in the reader, "inducing him to feel a sense of personal identification with the stories he is reading." He added that because of this characteristic of news, "The audience must participate in the news, much as it participates in the drama, by personal identification."

The metaphor of drama was also used to discuss people's identification with the news by the philosopher George Herbert Mead. Characteristically, Mead extended the observation to further insights into the role of news in social life. He emphasized the importance of news as drama for providing experience for individuals. News recounts "situations through which one can enter into the attitude and experience of other persons," Mead said (1934, p. 257) and added that "the drama has served this function in presenting what have been felt to be important situations." News reports, like drama, can carry

"individuals beyond the actual fixed walls which have arisen between them."

Likewise, Robert Park, in his writings on news as a form of knowledge, saw news as fundamentally dramatic, offering participation in events. "The multiplication of the means of communication," Park said (1940, p. 685), "has brought it about that anyone, even in the most distant part of the world, may now actually participate in events."

With Lippmann, Mead, and Park, though they drew vastly different conclusions from their thoughts, we see the experience of drama sometimes used to consider how aspects of news may call forth and induce experience in individuals. Through drama, the site of study is seen as the news itself.

The metaphor of news as drama can also draw critical attention to how news functions within social life. As drama, news is seen as active, dynamic, offerings its portrayals of the world, "in a way," as Burke says (1973, p. 1), "that contains an attitude toward them." James Carey has seen news in this way, as drama that offers the confirmation of a world and the representation of shared beliefs. He writes (1975, p. 8), "News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world."

It is here, where Carey grounds his thinking in the news itself, rather than the more ethereal relationship between readers and news, that his insights are strongest. "Under a

ritual view, then, news is not information but drama; it does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it" (1975, p. 9, italics added).

Other writers have affirmed the propensity of news to offer worlds. Marshall McLuhan saw news in this way. He called the newspaper a modern "Babel of myths" (1959, p. 347) and said, "Each [news] item makes its own world, unrelated to any other item save by date line" (1959, p. 341). In his study of the changing language in The Times of London, Ian Robinson (1973, p. 100) called newspapers "a primitive example of how a style of language creates a world."

By focusing on the ability of news to offer its worlds to a people, news as drama can also engage questions of political power and performance. In some political science research, the metaphor of news as drama is used to capture how politicians and reporters perceive and portray actors, issues and events. Murray Edelman (1976, p. 8) finds that controversial political acts become condensed into symbols, "emotional in impact, calling for conformtiy to promote social harmony, serving as the focus of psychological tensions." He says, "The parade of 'news' about politicial acts reported to us by the mass media and drunk up by the public as drama is the raw material of such symbolization."

More subtly, news as drama offers insights into how the requisites of drama structure and influence political actors,

issues and events. In more recent work, Edelman (1988) concentrates specifically on how dramas help create news. He says (p. 28) "the logic" that explains public attention to political problems does not turn on their severity "but rather upon dramatic appeals." He adds (p. 90), "Interest groups, public officials and editorial staffs share an interest in making news dramatic; economic, psychological, and ideological concerns reinforce each other in this respect."

Nimmo and Combs (1983, 1985) also speak of a "dramatic logic" that governs news reports. From this perspective, the logic of drama controls and channels the gathering and telling of the story. Dramatic logic calls for a sense of unity among diverse dramatic elements within a story or groups of stories. "This is achieved primarily through the unfolding of the drama itself," Nimmo and Combs say (1983, p. 15). Darnton (1975) and Schudson (1982) also have confronted the reflexive logic of story telling.

Mead too recognized that the conventions and structures of the news story influenced the very content of news. "The reporter is generally sent out to get a story, not the facts," Mead wrote (1964, p. 301), and added that groups "demand that the news shall take the forms which conform as far as possible to the results desired by these groups." He concluded that the form of the news story, like drama, shaped and was shaped by its ability to offer people a means to share and participate in community life:

> Whether this form of the enjoyed result has an aesthetic function or not depends upon whether the story of the news, after being thrown into this acceptable form, serves to interpret to the reader his experience as the shared experience of the community of which he feels himself to be a part" (p. 302).

In Stuart Hall's (1980, p. 129) nice phrase, "To put it paradoxically, the event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event."

Here, news as drama might also offer an additional perspective to critical theorists, in their efforts to incorporate the struggle for power into discussions of news. Rather than originating their discussion in political-economic structures, researchers might begin from the particular language of the news or the convention and canon of journalism to find evidence of hegemony and the struggle for power. Gitlin (1980) often begins from this point. "The mass media," he says (p. 2), "produce fields of definition and association, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete." Similarly, Gans says that journalists "choose moral disorder stories and frame others news as morality plays, they act as a kind of Greek chorus for nation and society" (1979, p. 293). "Moral disorder news therefore reinforces and relegitimates dominant national and society values by publicizing and helping to punish those who deviate from the values."

News as drama also has the advantage of fitting comfortably into the vocabulary of the newsroom. Reporters and editors have come to some understanding of news as drama. For example, the often-cited quote from Reuven Frank, then executive producer of NBC Evening News, in a staff memo initiating the network's half-hour news program, explicitly cites the comparison with drama.

> Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative. (Epstein, 1974, pp. 4-5).

The notion of drama is never far from the organization of many news broadcasts, providing the link between reports on weather and sports, presidents and three-alarm fires. From a baby stuck in a well to three gray whales stuck in an ice hole, drama is integral to how journalists think about news. For example, writing about news coverage of the three whales trapped in Alaskan ice, CBS News correspondent David Dow (1989, p. 46) continually and naturally refers to Alaska's "whale drama" and says, "In idle moments, reporters loved to analyze the story's appeal" (p. 48). In doing so, the reporters compared the story to another recent drama: One reporter, Dow said (p. 46), called the whales, "'three 30-ton Jessica McClures.'"

News as drama can bring some introspection and reflexivity to the way drama is conceived in professional circles. It is not enough to say news is dramatic. To put the matter this way saps the metaphor of all its conceptual punch. It avoids the implications of dramatic structure and logic. Surely news passes information along dramatically -- the final score, the name of the victim, the tally on the charter change. But journalists need to be shown that news offers worlds. Readers scour the sports pages even though they saw the game and know the final score. They read about and watch the burial of a terrorist victim although little new information is presented. Information is not the point. Drama is the point.

If news is like drama, it does more than inform, observe, and entertain; it serves as an integral form of cultural expression; it bears traces of how a community portrays and understands itself, and how that community views the world. It can suggest how meaning is created and controlled, how experience is shared and denied; it does this not by something outside the words and worlds of news but in the words and worlds themselves.

Thus, the metaphor of drama provides a number of advantages for discussions about news. The metaphor conceives of news dynamically, a strategy for a situation. It emphasizes how news offers readers and viewers an opportunity for participation in and identification with community life; it can provide insights into how news functions in social and cultural life, as well as how news engages in political life and the struggle for power.

Finally, the metaphor of news as drama can offer a site to study news itself, the convention and canon of journalism as curriculum (Carey, 1986) and the style and structure of the individual news report. The metaphor of drama brings us back then to the starting point of Burke's work: language.

Ultimately, the worthiness of news as drama may rest on its ability to encourage discussions of news from a humanistic tradition of criticism that looks for meaning and understanding, as well as strength and strategy, of theme and thought. News as drama, I will conclude, is a metaphor with important implications for study of news language.

IMPLICATIONS: THE STUDY OF NEWS LANGUAGE

Again from the requiem at Willy Loman's grave:

> Linda: Help me, Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that you're just on another trip. I keep expecting you, Willy, dear, I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. A sob rises in her throat. We're free and clear. Sobbing more fully, released: We're free (Miller, 1958, p. 139).

And from The New York Times report on Robert Dean Stethem:

> Mr. Stethem's 5-year tour of duty would have been up in 8 months. According to statements from those who knew him, he spoke of his love for the Navy and his pride in his work. He probably would have signed up for another tour, friends

said. In particular, friends said, he liked his job because it allowed him to travel and involved little likelihood of combat.

The metaphor of news as drama recognizes that news can and does construct worlds that engage profound questions and concerns. Each work above, as it confronts death, also considers the brutality of fate and the unfeeling, inexorable irony of life. The deaths are unspeakably sad. Each work offers a world in which fate and irony thwart a man's quest for meaning and redemption.

The traditional means of studying the worlds in Miller's drama is the study of language. Scholars ask: what are the possible meanings of the words? And though some scholars can and do place Miller and his play in social, historical and political context, inquiry is grounded in the words of the play. Likewise, inquiry into the meaning of the news report about Robert Dean Stethem can fruitfully be based in the words of the report. What are the possible meanings offered about the death of this man? Thus, the metaphor of news as drama leads to recognition and consideration of language.

Specifically, the metaphor of news as drama is linked to a fundamental assumption that, for humankind, it is language that brings order to experience and gives meaning to reality. As Mead (1934, p. 78) said, "Language does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or

object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created." Because news is above all a particular kind of language, it can be recognized as one of the means by which reality comes to have existence and meaning.

Recognition of the capacity of language to order experience does not necessarily commit students of news to the grim determinism of many structuralist theories. Language, after all, is used, reality is contested, meaning is negotiated. Hugh Dalziel Duncan (1968, p. 32), following Mead and Burke, captured the balance between structure and content. He wrote in the introduction to Symbols in Society, "I argue in the following pages, as I have in all my work, that how we communicate determines what we communicate, just as others argue (and rightly so) that what we communicate determines how we communicate."

But how does one go about studying this process? The answer lies not in something outside of language -- not economics, ideology, sex or religion -- but in language itself. "Burke's argument that we act in terms of language, as well as biology, physics, economics, politics, or God, is not new," wrote Duncan (1985, p. 144). "But the way he faces language as a social fact is very new. He argues that our greatest body of observable social 'facts' are not derived from what people do, but what they say about what they do."

News, if nothing else, is what people say about what they do; news is language, an observable social fact. In terms of hermeneutic theory, language offers a world, a world accessible

by interpretation. As Paul Ricoeur (1976, p. 88) puts it, "The text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orientating oneself within it." And this language -- and its possible worlds -- are open to inquiry.

To bring together Burke and Ricoeur: the study of human symbolic acts is accomplished in terms of drama; and the study of drama is a study of language, conceived dynamically as the offering of a world. The implications for the study of news are great. Rather than studying the failure or success of news in reporting a "real world," inquiry seeks the strategy, structure, meaning and motives of the worlds that news offers.

Thus, study of news as drama leads to the study of news language, that is, 1) study of the language the news uses to report selected events -- especially the kinds of worlds offered by that language; and 2) study of the extent to which the language of news encourages particular events to be reported and in a particular way.

The Many Worlds of News Language

The first and most natural implication derived from news as drama is a study of the language with which news describes and reports events. Although news long has been subject to traditional content analyses, to study news as drama is to approach news reports with the tools and perspective more commonly associated with literary and dramatic criticism.

"Journalism provides audiences with models for action and feeling, with ways to size up situations," writes James Carey

(1974, p. 245), paraphrasing Burke. "It shares these qualities with all literary acts and therefore like all literary acts must be kept under constant critical examination for the manner, method and purpose whereby it carries out these actions."

Herbert Gans too notes the value of interpretive approaches for the study of news. "The last, but logically the first, task awaiting news researchers is a revival of qualitative content analysis, to understand what various news media say, show, assume, and value about a range of major issues and institutions in U.S. life," writes Gans (1983, p. 181). "The model I have in mind here is the 'thick description' that literary analysts and critics apply to their 'texts.'" Gans notes that some excellent work already has been done with qualitative approaches to news, by thoughtful scholars such as Gitlin (1980) and Hall (1982). The metaphor of news as drama would organize and channel similar work in an attempt to understand the implications of the worlds conveyed by news language.

Ideally, the metaphor of news as drama would also be incorporated into discussions of journalists about the effectiveness of their work. The metaphor invests journalists with the real privilege and responsibility of their craft. They create worlds as well as investigate them. They can be judged not by the accuracy of their stenography, or their ability to report and record, but by the cohesion and correctness and logic of their work.

For example, in the final scene of "Death of a Salesman," when Happy vows to prove that "Willy Loman did not die in vain," the playwright does not need to defend his choice of words by arguing, "That's what he said." The dramatist is judged by the meaning and impact of the words. Similarly, in The New York Times report, when Robert Dean Stethem's brother is quoted as saying, "'He died for every free person in the world today,'" it is completely beside the point to enact a debate upon whether or not the brother spoke those words. The really interesting thing about the words is their meaning in that report.

Obviously, the reporter chose to include them. Thousands of words were said that day about Robbie Stethem in many locations. The journalist arranged to be at graveside, selected those particular words and all the other words in the report; the journalist fashioned the words in a particular order, with dramatic logic, placing the words of sacrifice at the conclusion of the report, enacting an effective, satisfying conclusion. All the unseen organizational pressures and routines, all the historical, cultural and political forces underlying news on terrorism, all the personal traits and idiosyncracies of the journalist -- all come to have meaning, in an inquiry about news, in the act of the text, in the worlds offered by the report.

Yet the implications of news as drama can be taken only so far. Inquiry must stop at the boundary of metaphor. News is a particular symbolic form, different from drama. The line between news and drama is not always sharp but it does exist, and thus

the need for metaphor. We do not say news is drama; we say news is like drama. The important caveat comes because of the nature of the subject. Journalists are charged with telling stories about real events (Darnton, 1975); news creates stories of events selected from the previous 24 hours.

Usually, though not always, the dramatist invents and creates events and characters from the fabric of imagination. Usually, though not always, the journalist does not invent events nor create characters and actions from imagination. When lines are crossed, though, such as with Janet Cooke's fabricated story for the Washington Post and Michael Daly's tale for the New York Daily News, it creates an interesting, electric tension in journalism, and subsequent discussions about news can be revealing (Eason, 1986).

Thus the first implication from the metaphor of news as drama is the privileging of interpretive study on language used to report events and on the meanings of the worlds offered in that language. Ricoeur (1976, p. 92) puts the matter -- and draws the lines -- eloquently:

> What is indeed to be understood -- and consequently appropriated -- in a text? Not the intention of the author, which is supposed to be hidden behind the text; not the historical situation common to the author and his original readers; not the expectations or feelings of these original readers; not even their understanding of themselves as historical and cultural phenomena. What has to be

appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text. In other words, what has to be appropriated is nothing other than the power of disclosing a world.

How News Language May Shape the News

The second area of study suggested by the metaphor of news as drama is how the language of news may encourage particular events to be reported and in a particular way. Language orders experience; to repeat Mead's terms, "it makes possible the existence or the appearance" of a situation (1934, p. 78). And as language, news too orders experience, and makes possible the existence or appearance of events in the news.

"Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have," Lippmann said (1922, p. 354). "There are no objective standards here. There are conventions." And those conventions assume observable form in the language of news reports. 3

Study may first show that news language influences the entire process of selecting news. Gans (1979) discusses five dominant theories of news story selection: 1) journalist-centered, in which reporters decide upon the news; 2) organization-centered, in which professional routines influence story selection; 3) event-centered, in which news appears to be inherent in particular events; 4) technology-centered, in which

particular media technology are biased toward particular stories; and 5) source-centered, in which official actors control the news.

Language, however, may precede all such considerations. The convention and canon of news language may affect if the journalist even "recognizes" an event 4 as news or decides to transform an issue into a story; may confirm or alter the journalist's professional activities and routine; may guide the journalist toward selection of particular angles or aspects of events; may suggest what and how technology is employed; and may influence what sources the journalist contacts and how those sources perceive the story.

The stress on news language does not deny the the great value and insights of studies on newsmaking, phenomenology, sources, historical eras, political-economic structures and other forces affecting news. But language can add another component, suggesting study of how such forces have shaped and been shaped by news language.

The metaphor of news as drama may also suggest directions for study of the news audience. Drama suggests an entirely different set of questions than those currently posed. Those who study drama do not ask about the uses and gratifications for the audience of "Death of a Salesman." They do not ask about the effect of the play on life insurance policies. They debate the significance of themes, messages, symbols and signs. They ask about the possible meaning of the play for people who usually are

not even conceived of as an "audience." The metaphor of news as drama would center study not on "audiences" but on human relations and the possible ways that human relations shape and are shaped by the language of news.

Perhaps through the metaphor of news as drama, students of news can work toward an understanding of something like dramatic requisites of the news, something akin to "dramatic adequacy," that might explain how and why particular events get reported and in a particular way. 5 The thought that can guide inquiry: Language channels and guides reporters, affecting the places they go to and do not go to, whom they talk with and do not talk with, questions they ask and do not ask, words they write and do not write, what their sources say and do not say, what editors print and do not print, the meanings readers are offered and are not offered.

CONCLUSION

Like many others, I have conceived of inquiry as a discussion, a conversation that tries to make sense of what is happening. Inquiry in -- conversations about -- news 6 sometimes get stalled, I believe, because the traditional metaphor of news as science still dominates the discussion, organizing experience in a particular way, limiting talk.

I have attempted to point out that another useful metaphor exists in our literature, a metaphor with real implications for the study of news. The metaphor of news as drama can engage the most fundamental questions about news and social life, addressing

the whole of journalism convention and canon, as well as the individual words of a report about the burial of a terrorist victim. Perhaps of most importance, drama focuses attention on the often overlooked area of news language, or more broadly, in Burke's (1966, p. vii) words, drama provides "a theory of language, a philosophy of language based on that theory, and methods of analysis developed in accordance with the theory and the philosophy." Organized by the metaphor of drama, sensitive to the influence of language, discussions of news can continue to make sense of how news orders experience, and creates and confirms meaning, that is, of how it is that news language makes sense.

NOTES

1. The report was datelined, "Washington, June 20," carried the attribution "Special to The New York Times," but bore no by-line.

2. Dewey's curious involvement with the proposed newspaper "Thought News" was a direct result of this hope for news as social science (Czitrom, 1982, pp. 102-08).

3. In Burke's terms, journalistic conventions might be "a grammar of motives."

4. Perhaps the proverbial "nose for news" is a misplaced sense. Recognizing news may actually have more to do with "having a good ear" for the language of news.

5. In another context, Lawrence and Timberg (1979) speak of the "mythic adequacy" of news reports.

6. In a similar use of words, the columnist David Broder (1987, p. 366) writes, "At its best, a newspaper is in constant conversation with its readers."

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